DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 490 EA 026 191

AUTHOR Scherr, Mary Woods
TITLE Building Community Support: Crucial Task for New Superintendent.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Characteristics; *Administrator Effectiveness; *Administrator Role; *Community Support; Elementary Secondary Education; Females; Quality of Working Life; School Community Relationship; *Superintendents; Urban Education; *Women Administrators
IDENTIFIERS *Beginning Administrators

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined the experiences of first-time women superintendents. It was part of a national case study of 18 beginning superintendents who assumed the position during the 1992-93 school year. The paper presents data from case studies of two women superintendents, both in urban districts, with a focus on how they built community support for public education. One superintendent was a district "insider"; the other had previously held the position of assistant superintendent in another district. Data were derived through interviews, observation, and archival analysis. Although gender should be considered in studying leadership experiences, the data indicated too many differences to conclude that the women shared similar experiences as superintendents due to gender, or that they inhabited a uniform female world. Insider/outsider status, rather than gender, had more impact on the ways in which the superintendents garnered community support. Contains 18 references. (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 375 490

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. Scherr

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT: CRUCIAL TASK FOR NEW SUPERINTENDENT

Mary Woods Scherr
University of San Diego

Prepared for
American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting
New Orleans April 4-8, 1994

EA 026 191

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT: CRUCIAL TASK FOR NEW SUPERINTENDENTS

Introduction

Reported shortages of qualified candidates to fill superintendencies (Murphy, 1991) and the rapid turnover of superintendents (Chadwell, 1991), especially in urban districts, indicate a need to better understand the day to day experiences of those who lead our public schools. Surprisingly, little is known about how first-time superintendents survive or become superintendent drop-outs, either voluntarily or involuntarily. To gain these understandings, a national research team is developing case studies of 18 first-time superintendents who assumed the position during the 1992-1993 school year: 9 men and 9 women. As one of the members of this team, coordinated by Carolyn Chapman, a former Deputy Superintendent who is now a professor at the University of Nevada, I have been conducting two case studies, following each superintendent for twelve months.

My participating superintendents are both women, who comprise only 7.3% of the superintendents in the U.S. (Montenegro, 1993). In a recent study exploring why women leave the superintendency, Tallerico, Burstyn, & Poole (1993) reported that 70 % of the first time women superintendents did not sign a second contract for the superintendency. Even though the number of women in their study was small, their finding indicates researchers must learn more about the experiences of first time women superintendents if we want their numbers to increase. This paper is based on data relating to one crucial task for new superintendents: Building community support for public education.

Purpose of the Study

A decade ago Klein (1983) noted the distinction between research on women and research for women. My part of the research explicitly seeks to benefit both prospective and current women superintendents by exploring multiple aspects of this complex task as performed by two different women in two different settings. The findings suggest questions that must be addressed by both researchers and practitioners to better prepare and support women superintendents.

Research Design:

Although many qualitative studies have been published on the lives of teachers, few such studies have been conducted with superintendents. To understand the lived experience of first time superintendents, in-depth case studies are particularly appropriate (Miklos, 1988)

One of the reviewers of this symposium recommended acceptance, but expressed a hope that the participants would discuss research design and methodology, explaining: "A criticism of research on women's issues is that frequently studies are structured to support the women's perspective--a claim of lack of objectivity is often made. Another concern is that studies which focus exclusively on women are open to the same criticisms leveled at "old" studies which focused/included only men."

I think it is important to respond to the reviewer's three concerns. First, the interview protocol adopted by our research team did not focus on the "women's perspective." I think it could be termed genderless, but that leads to other dilemmas. Does the methodology and analysis lead to the suppression of women's experiences? If gender is a "fundamental

category" as Sandra Harding (1986, p. 57) maintains, then does not the gender of the superintendent need to be considered? Bell's critique of Shakeshaft's (1986) book, Women in Educational Administration, suggests another question for consideration. Does a focus on women contribute to the view that women inhabit a uniform, female world? Each of these questions will be considered in the analysis of the data.

Secondly, this work seeks to understand the lived experiences of two women superintendents who are willing to share their thoughts, successes, concerns, and fears. Their views are, of course, based on their own perceptions of the superintendency and, therefore, there is no claim of objectivity. On the contrary, rich qualitative research is premised upon subjectivity.

My response to the third concern is very straightforward. The time required for in-depth qualitative research usually prevents one researcher from studying multiple numbers of both men and women. This is particularly true for case study research. The national research team, as stated above, did study both men and women. Yet considering the preponderance of men in the superintendency and how little we know of the experiences of women in that role, I believe researchers are not only justified in studying women but should be encouraged to do so.

The participants:

Both of the participants in my case studies are women superintendents in urban districts. One superintendent, Dr. Theresa Brownell, a pseudonym, is in a Midwest district with over 20,000 students; twenty percent are minority students and twenty percent are

students below the poverty line. Dr. Brownell, an Anglo, entered the superintendency as an outsider. She had previously been an assistant superintendent in a much larger district. The second superintendent, Dr. Marilyn Collins, is in a Southwest district of over 100,000 students; over 60% are minority students and over 40% of the students are below the poverty line. Dr. Collins is a minority woman who was continuously promoted within the district until she reached the top position.

Data Source:

Data for the two extensive studies included transcripts of interviews, some by telephone, some face-to-face, that were conducted every 3-5 weeks; field notes from site visits shadowing the superintendent and attending board meetings, and archival data consisting of newspaper articles, significant communications to staff, and board minutes. For the sake of anonymity all names of people and places have been changed and some details have, of necessity, been masked.

Data for this paper were drawn primarily from the superintendent in the Midwest who has completed more than 12 months in the superintendency. Data related to the Southwest superintendent, who has not yet completed her first year, were included to illustrate the differences between the two women, the importance of context, the complexity of their task and to discourage the reader from concluding that this paper presents the woman's experience or represents the female world.

Data Analysis: The analysis of the data was influenced by the current research on the superintendent and with special emphasis on alternative

ways of leading (Mc Cabe, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1992; Rosener, 1992; Kempner, 1991) and alternative lenses for reflection and analysis (Bergman, 1991; Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Clatterbaugh, 1990).

Building Community Support

In a very real sense almost everything a new superintendent says and does influences community support for education. The following examples, therefore, are representative of activities that required significant time.

Challenges for an Outsider

Dr. Theresa Brownell, the superintendent new to the district, established three priorities for her first six months. One was to build community support for public education, which is the focus of this paper. To understand the challenges she faced, one needs to know that she was hired by the school board on a split vote; two of the board members who hired her were up for re-election during her first year; and the minority population was angry because no minority candidate was among the finalists. She accepted the position because the district had developed an elaborate long range plan that very closely matched her vision and the community had a history of strong support for education.

She began her tenure knowing that the number of students requiring special services was increasing and that budgetary constraints would mean a single digit increase in the budget for the first time in many years, necessitating a lower increase for salaries than had been typical in previous years.

Early in her tenure, I asked: "What are your priorities this year?" She quickly replied: "To be in the schools and out in the community." The first day on the job she visited a school, believing it was "an important message to the staff and the community that the new superintendent was in a school." Within the first five months she visited every school and each work site at the rate of ten per month. Visibility in the schools and community were integrally related to how she expected to build community support.

During the first few weeks on the job she had met with each board member individually for two hours to learn his/her "overall agenda," "personal agenda," and "expectations for the new superintendent. She tabulated their concerns and gave each board member a copy of her summary for their verification. She recognized that school board members have their own constituencies and their own circles of influence which can promote or erode public support.

She initiated regular meetings with the editorial staffs of newspapers and the television stations. Improving the district's image in the press was one of the board's primary concerns.

To become knowledgeable about the community, she conscientiously followed a plan guided by the Luvern Cunningham Constituency Wheel designed for staying in touch with all parts of the community and making sure that no groups were omitted.

A detailed analysis of her daily schedule for a two-week period showed that her official day usually began at 7 am. and continued until 10 pm. except Friday which ended at 6:30. She was "speaking somewhere almost every evening and usually a couple of times on Saturday or Sunday." The weekdays included visits to schools, meetings with business

groups such as Chamber of Commerce, Rotary and special interest groups, planning sessions with staff, briefings regarding board of education agenda items, meetings with editorial staffs and public addresses. The school board held an executive session which began at 5 p.m. and was followed immediately by a regular meeting which lasted until 11:30.

After two months on the job she felt she had "a sense of community issues and what's working and what's not." She believed she had heard from every different franchise group." As a result of her intense immersion in the community, she concluded:

> I see the superintendency right now... [with] a great deal of hope for those who want to change and change in terms of truly having parents be partners in the system rather than baking cookies and raising funds. Change in terms of the minority groups expecting me to retool staff to enable them to have relationships of respect and mutual trust in decision making on behalf of children rather than just a one way street. Expectations from a mayor and county executive that I will somehow really expand the partnership in terms of delivering health, social, and educational services in a very collaborative model. Expectations from the fiscally conservative community that I will be true to my reputation of being a good fiscal manager and yet assuring student success for every child.

To involve the community in more than "baking cookies" and "raising funds" she introduced a citizen budget process for the community. This district "has provided a very high quality of service to their young people," she explained, "and their property taxes are high also and so ... I suggested to the board .. an opportunity for citizens to comment on what was

important for them even before I put my recommendations in the budget."

She created a packet of materials illustrating three scenarios for the future ranging from "the same level of service" which required the highest percentage of increase in the budget to no property tax increase. She listed "a menu of deductions that would need to take place if anything other than the same service went through and asked for citizen testimony." Long, long meetings were held with television call-in as well as radio call-in on three different nights.

For nine of the first twelve months on the job, the union and the board were in negotiation. Nine months of what a local newspaper described as "bitter wrangling" in a "nasty tenor" marked by sick-outs, slowdowns, student protests by students who feared a sick-out would prevent them from getting college applications completed, and picket lines at school board meetings. A threatened strike, the first in 20 years, was avoided in an eleventh hour negotiating session. Both sides claimed victory. Both sides also acknowledged the "ill will" created by the long, drawn-out negotiations and recognized the need to heal relationships between the board and the union.

During the slowdown, Dr. Brownell kept a very low profile. Other district administrators directly responsible for public relations and labor negotiations were the spokespersons. The superintendent refused to be goaded into teacher bashing or responding to gibes. She doubled her time in schools and explained to the press that her role was to keep the situation as stabilized as possible. When her critics demanded to know where she was when a sick-in closed several schools, a district spokesperson said "She's been in her office since four a.m. planning which schools to close and which could remain open."

The goodwill established by regular meetings with the editorial board and her visibility in schools and in the community resulted in more favorable press, in spite of the tensions, than had been customary in previous years.

Comparisons with an Insider

Early analyses of data revealed similarities but also some striking differences in the experiences of these two first-time women superintendents.

Dr. Marilyn Collins is a minority woman in a predominately minority urban district. She has been in the district for over 25 years, moving up from teacher to principal to central office administrator before becoming Superintendent. Representatives of many community groups had urged the board to hire her. The board's decision to offer her the superintendency without a search was unanimous.

Although she felt she was hired because the board was happy with the direction in which the district was going and she had been a part of the progress, she felt it necessary to articulate her vision. "People will question--wonder if we're going in the same way or whether something is new." After a short time in the superintendency she believed that staff members were "reassured that [her vision didn't] send the district in a new direction." Yet, she also felt she needed to continually articulate the vision.

She has increased speech making "markedly" over the last superintendent. "I don't know whether it's because I'm new, because I'm good or because I 'm cheap," she laughed. She thinks the political environment--i.e. school financing problems statewide and public, interest

in school choice-- contribute to the requests. "I try to be responsive and get as many of the requests on my calendar as possible," she told me. Therefore, she speaks to local organizations three or four times a week--almost as many times as the outsider superintendent.

Both districts are experiencing changing demographics, budgetary constraints, the public's expectation to be more involved, union problems, and the importance of the media. As Dr. Collins explained: "We are growing and more costly students are coming--the new students cost more to educate because of language, because of special education needs, because of reading difficulties or learning issues--problems related to poverty."

The shortage of money for city and county agencies, for non-profit organizations, and for public schools is forcing collaboration across boundaries once considered sacred. "It's the feeling on the part of each of us that our work touches one another and as resources become restricted it's important to know what the other is doing... and push toward greater collaboration and efficiency." Integrating services for children from a variety of agencies has already begun in Dr. Collin's district and extensive plans to expand those collaborative efforts are well underway.

Formerly, Dr. Collin's explained, citizen involvement usually meant serving on advisory committees, but now she has found that "people want to help and be involved from the development of something and not just have things handed to them." Recently a large group of business people worked with the district in establishing a new high school and "helped to shape the curriculum" and "shape and provide training in total quality."

Another group of citizens is working with the district to develop a health careers magnate school. Involvement at these levels "takes a lot of

time because they want to sit with you and work through the development."

Dr. Collins' first few months in office also included difficulties with union negotiations. The Union protested a board decision which they considered a unilateral action in violation of the contract. They issued a resolution of their intent to engage in concerted action if the district did not take strong steps toward collaboration. Efforts to promote more collaborative, management-union relationships were in progress.

Meetings related to the media required the superintendent's time. The media has "strong feelings about their rights and responsibilities" which are sometimes in conflict with the administrators' beliefs that as public officials they are "charged with running schools and maintaining safety and order and looking out for children and their learning environment." To resolve these conflicts, joint meetings were initiated to develop guidelines for working together.

The time required to learn the needs of the district and to gain support from the community varied dramatically between the two women. The differences between being an outsider and an insider was clearly one major factor. After four months on the job, Dr. Brownell reported that she spent nearly 85% of her time in building community support. When I asked if she felt that was due to being an outsider, she answered with a resounding "Yes."

Long days were typical for both superintendents, but at several points during the study, Dr. Collins, the insider superintendent, reported significantly lower levels of stress. Dr. Brownell, the outsider superintendent once remarked that she didn't know how long anyone could keep up with the daily schedule. On one occasion early in her

tenure, a woman in a department store recognized the new superintendent from newspaper pictures and introduced herself as a former superintendent in another state. Dr. Brownell was surprised to hear herself "blurt out, 'How long did you last?'"

Questions for Consideration

I kept feeling that there was another level of analysis, another way of understanding Dr. Brownell's professional life. What was the significance of her actions to her? What did maintaining visibility and being accessible mean to her? Or, in other words:

Did the methodology and analysis lead to the suppression of her experiences as a woman?

While shadowing her for two days--two long days--during a site visit, I gained several significant clues.

In a scrapbook she's been keeping since the beginning of her superintendency, I saw copies of news articles featuring students. She sent a laminated copy to each student along with her letter of commendation. A mother of one of the featured high school girls wrote a thank you note to say what an inspirational model Dr. Brownell was for her daughter.

Later that day on a visit to a middle school, we walked into a classroom where students were working in small groups around tables. One of the girls looked up as we entered and said to another, " I know who she is--she's the superintendent."

The next day while driving between appointments, Dr. Brownell turned into a Taco Bell announcing, "Today this is as good as it's going to

get-- we need to pick up something." As we were waiting in line, two high school girls walked up and beamed at the superintendent. "We go to Lincoln High and we met you last week." The superintendent enthusiastically asked questions about activities at the school.

Dr. Brownell instituted a hot line in the district for parents or community members who had a problem they were unable to get solved elsewhere. Several times the superintendent met with a parent to learn what needs their children had that were not being met at their schools.

I gradually realized her strong commitment to be a role model for young women and to demonstrate her commitment to students by being in the schools. The importance of relationships with students, staff, parents and the broader community was undoubtedly what being a superintendent meant to her. It may be so central to the core of what she feels most strongly about that she is unwilling to reduce her time in the schools and community for fear paperwork and meetings at the district office could swallow up all of her. She was fully aware of how much time community building was taking and the difficulties; she spoke of "trying to reach out to the very diverse community and trying to be approachable and listen and respond to all of them simultaneously, which is difficult at times."

The Southwest superintendent expressed many of the same concerns but she had a staff she knew well and was apparently able to delegate with confidence. While waiting for an interview with Dr. Collins during a site visit, I heard a secretary tactfully explain: "Dr. Collins relies on the Assistant Superintendents to resolve that type of problem. They are the ones who know the individual school situations most clearly. I suggest you talk with Dr. Whitney. Her number is ----- or, I can transfer you now."

Does the gender of the superintendent need to be considered?

Yes, for two main reasons: 1) Women superintendents are usually treated differently due to pervasive sexism in society and 2) they may fulfill the role differently than most men due to socialization and /or different career experiences.

In the scrapbook mentioned above, I also saw a note from a principal apologizing for the "appalling introduction" Dr. Brownell had received from a staff member and thanking her for the "gracious manner" in which the superintendent had clearly indicated its inappropriateness and sexism.

Later I asked if she perceived gender differences between men and women superintendents. "Absolutely," she replied. "I have a list." The list includes inappropriate and illegal questions surreptitiously asked during recruitment as well as recurring inappropriate questions asked during interviews. The newspaper articles proved that both her wardrobe and hair style were the subjects of discussion.

The Southwest superintendent, Dr. Collins, did not volunteer any anecdotes regarding gender. One explanation may be that she was promoted within a district in which 50% of the principals are women and 50% of the superintendent's cabinet are women.

During several interviews Dr. Brownell referred to her ways of leading: Emphasis on collaboration, non-adversarial relationships, and no concern for who gets the credit. Yet she also specifically referred to a male colleague she admired. She planned to visit his district to learn the specifics of his organizational plan.

Neither of these women used "direct and control"-type language. Neither of them used expressions typical of administrators according to

Kempner (1991) - - terms borrowed from the world of sports, the military or business. Due to their career backgrounds, both superintendents took more active roles in curriculum development than their male predecessors.

Does a focus on women contribute to stereotyping and add to the view of women as inhabiting a female world?

The data from these two case studies indicate too many differences to conclude that these women have similar experiences as superintendents due to gender or that they inhabit a uniform female world. One of the differences in their experiences as first time superintendents was due to outsider versus insider status. The following quotation explicitly states advantages of an insider:

> One of the things I had going for me was the knowledge that lots of people supported me and I enjoyed their respect for my integrity--- that's at the core of your leadership. Even the things that you don't know how to do will be forgiven until you learn how to do them. But if you have to go in and establish your character, your integrity-- those basics-- then every little thing can stand out as a major flaw. The support I had was an important plus going into this-- everybody is going to make some mistakes. Some problems are just brand new mutations--just need to use your knowledge, your relationships and expertise of others.

Both women began their tenure extremely well qualified for their positions. Both have extensive knowledge. In addition, Dr. Collins had strong relationships within the district and knew which members of her staff had what kind of expertise. By contrast, Dr. Brownell had to gain the

confidence and trust of the board, her senior staff, especially the cabinet, and the community. Since she had moved to a new area, she had no support system in place either within or outside of the education world. She did, however, receive an enthusiastic welcome from the community and women in positions of leadership, political as well as academic, greeted her in a celebratory spirit.

The community has continued to be a source of strong support for both women, who have received numerous awards and honors during their first few months as new superintendents.

Conclusion

How can women superintendents be supported in new positions, especially when their first superintendency is in a new geographical region? How can superintendents be better prepared for urban problems: More students to educate that cost more to educate-- students with problems related to poverty; severe budgetary constraints, collaboration required not just within a district but across agencies; union-management issues, and a public more demanding of engagement?

Dr. Collins gave her view regarding the most generic problem facing school districts:

> One of the things we always say is there is too much change going on and we'd like to slow it down, take things a little slower and in a more linear and organized fashion, but ... I think that's a fairly naive assumption that that will ever occur because I think the truth of the matter is that change is going to get faster and faster. The preparation that we will need as individuals and as organizations is

in those skills dealing with change and thinking change and reflecting on it and incorporating broad understandings as opposed to learning how to deal with one specific kind of event.

And finally, and perhaps most important for survival, how can the burden of the superintendency be lessened? One of the superintendents in this study stated that she would quit when it stopped being fun. Considering the schedules and pressures, I'm reminded of a recent cartoon in the New Yorker showing one ant at the top of the hill, another ant trudging up the hill with a huge clumb on her back, calling out "I'll quit when it stops being fun."

REFERENCES

Bell, C. (1989). Essay review, Shakeshaft, C. Women in educational administration in Educational Administration Quarterly, 25(3), 315-318.

Bergman, S. J. (1991) Men's psychological development: A relational perspective. Work in Progress. No. 48. Wellesley College, MA: The Stone Center.

Chadwell, J. (1991). Superintendents bail out en masse, Professional Opportunity Magazine, February.

Clatterbaugh, K. (1990). Contemporary perspectives on masculinity: Men, women, and politics in modern society. Boulder CO: Westview Press.

Cunningham, L. (1992). Monitoring, mapping, and interpreting the sources and content of change, Gahanna, Ohio: Leadership Development Associates.

Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Harding, S. (1986). The science question in feminism. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kempner, K. (1991). Getting into the castle of educational administration, Peabody Journal of Education, 66 (3), 104-123.

Klein, R. D. (1983). How to do what we want to do: Thoughts about feminist methodology. In G. Bowles & R.D. Klein (eds.), Theories of women's studies (pp.88-104). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Konnert, M. W. & Augenstein, J. J. (1990). The superintendency in the nineties. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing.

McCabe, D. H. (1992) You're invited but there's no free lunch. Paper presented at the Women's Administrators Annual Conference, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.

Miklos, E. (1988). Administrator selection, career patterns, succession, and socialization. In Boyan, N. J. (ed.), Handbook of research on educational administration. New York: Teachers College Press.

Miller, J. B. (1976). Toward a new psychology of women. Boston: Beacon Press.

Montenegro, X. (1993). Women and racial minority representation in school administration. American Association of School Administrators.

Murphy, J. T. (March, 1991). Superintendents as Saviors: From the Terminator to Pogo. Phi Delta Kappa, 72, 507-513.

Rosener, J. B. (1990) Ways women lead, Harvard Business Review, 68, 119-125.

Sergiovanni, T. (1992). Why we should seek substitutes for leadership, Educational Leadership, 45(5), 41-45.

Tallerico, M. , Burstyn, J. & Poole, W. (1993). Gender and politics at work: Why women exit the superintendency. Fairfax, Virginia: The National Policy Board for Educational Administration.